DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 410 853 HE 030 428

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TITLE	Part-Time Higher Education in Scotland. Interchange, No. 45.
INSTITUTION	Scottish Council for Research in Education, Edinburgh.
SPONS AGENCY	Scottish Office Education and Industry Dept., Edinburgh. Research and Intelligence Unit.
ISSN	ISSN-0969-613X
PUB DATE	1997-06-00
NOTE	12p.
AVAILABLE FROM	RIU Dissemination Officer, The Scottish Office Education and Industry Department, Victoria Quay, Edinburgh EH6 6QQ, Scotland.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research (143)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Access to Education; Attendance; Case Studies; *College Students; Education Work Relationship; Educational Finance; *Enrollment; Foreign Countries; Higher Education; *Part Time Students; Participant Characteristics; Participant Satisfaction; *Participation; Partnerships in Education; School Business Relationship; Student Educational Objectives; Student Financial Aid; Student Motivation; Student Participation; Work Study Programs
IDENTIFIERS	*Scotland

ABSTRACT

This study examined the current role of part-time higher education at first degree and Higher National Certificate/Diploma levels in Scotland. It looked at patterns of participation and availability, and also assessed the advantages and disadvantages of part-time study from the perspective of students, institutions, and employers. The research included analysis of statistical and documentary evidence, interviews with higher education policymakers, and case studies of part-time programs at four institutions. Among findings of the study were: (1) while the absolute number of part-time students in Scotland has increased, the percentage of students attending part time has declined; (2) employer support for part-time study is qualified and links between institutions and employers are patchy; (3) part-time students have diverse backgrounds and most combine personal and vocational motives for studying; (4) the impact on the student's life can be disproportionate to the number of hours spent in the classroom; (5) student support services are often inadequate; (6) learning experiences differ for full-time and part-time students; and (7) part-time higher education requires a clear policy of support on the part of government, changes in the system of student finance, and institutional commitment. (CH)

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ED 410 853

THE SCOTTISH OFFICE
Education and Industry Department

INTERCHANGE

No 45

Part-time Higher Education in Scotland

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Research and Intelligence Unit

ISSN 0969-613X

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Edited and produced for The Scottish Office Education and Industry Department by the RIU Dissemination Officer at The Scottish Council for Research in Education, June 1997.

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Part-time Higher Education in Scotland

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Debates about the future of Higher Education (HE), together with a renewed attention to lifelong learning and skills for competitiveness, have placed part-time HE under the spotlight. This study aimed to take stock of the current role of part-time provision at first degree and Higher National Certificate/Diploma level in Scotland, and to inform debates about its future place in the Scottish HE system, by reviewing current provision, studying influences on participation, and assessing the advantages and disadvantages of part-time HE from the perspectives of students, institutions and employers. It analysed statistical and documentary evidence, interviewed senior policy-makers in HE institutions (HEIs) and Further Education colleges (FECs), and conducted case studies of part-time programmes in four institutions. The study was commissioned by The Scottish Office Education and Industry Department (SOEID) and The Scottish Higher Education Funding Council (SHEFC).

Key findings

- Part-time Higher Education students in Scotland have increased in absolute terms, to over 46,000 in 1993/4, but full-time student numbers have grown more quickly, so that part-time student numbers have diminished as a proportion of the total. At undergraduate level part-time students remain concentrated in the Open University (OU), post-1992 universities and some FECs; their status, in most institutions and in the system as a whole, remains marginal.
- Many institutions have a policy to expand part-time provision, often as part of a policy for flexibility. However, it will take time and a climate of sustained commitment for these policies to bear fruit.
- Students are the main customers of part-time HE, even when supported by employers; employer support is becoming more qualified; links between institutions and employers are patchy and call into question the notion of institutional "responsiveness" to employer demand.
- Part-time students have diverse backgrounds and characteristics. Many have previous experience of further education (FE) or HE and their current courses build on this experience.
- Most students combine personal and vocational motives for study. These are closely intertwined, and moreover can change over time as they progress in their studies. Future policy provision should not be based on a rigid division between the personal and the vocational.
- The impact on a student's life can be disproportionate to the number of hours spent in the classroom. Most students combine study with work and family responsibilities; this can be a source of stress but it can give a structure to their lives which full-timers lack.
- Support services for part-time students are often inadequate. The OU's dedicated services and its expertise in part-time provision are favourably reflected in reports on the quality of OU student experience.
- Most students view their experience of part-time study positively; the great majority anticipate future benefits, even if these are uncertain.
- The experience of learning is different for full-time and part-time students; comparisons of quality are bound to be arbitrary.
- If part-time Higher Education is to take root across the system, it will require a combination of a clear policy of support on the part of government; a change in the system of student finance; and sustained institutional commitment.

Objectives and methods

The project sought:

- to review current patterns of participation and provision of part-time HE, to analyse recent trends, and to assess the place of part-time HE in the policies of HEIs and FECs;
- to determine the advantages and disadvantages of part-time HE for the different parties involved; and
- to explore factors influencing students' (or their employers') decisions on participation.

It had three main components: a review of prospectuses, statistics and other evidence on opportunities for part-time HE and participation; interviews with institutional policy-makers; and case studies of part-time programmes in four institutions.

Participation and provision in part-time HE

The rapid expansion of HE led to a policy of consolidation or capping of full-time student numbers. Our study was carried out in 1994-96, soon after this policy was introduced, when many institutions were reconsidering their provision of part-time HE. Other trends which set the scene for the research included the spread of modularisation, semesterisation, and credit accumulation and transfer (CAT) arrangements; the use of more flexible methods of course delivery (including the use of educational technology and distance learning); and the development of FE-HE links.

Full-time student numbers rose much faster than part-time numbers in the decade to 1994. This was true for HE (advanced) students in both HE and FE sectors. Part-timers as a proportion of total numbers declined from 32% to 26%. Trends varied according to level of study. At first degree level, part-time participation grew proportionately faster than full-time participation, but from a very low base. Entry to HNC/HND courses, with a much higher base of part-time students in the 1980s, increased faster among full-timers.

Part-time provision is concentrated within a relatively small number of institutions.

Should part-time provision be more evenly spread, or is it better for some institutions to develop particular expertise?

Excluding postgraduates, 34% of part-time HE students in 1993-94 were studying for first degrees, 40% for HNC/HNDs and the remainder for other courses including HE diplomas, some initial professional qualifications and courses not leading to an award. Table 1 shows wide variation in the part-time provision of different institutional sectors or sub-sectors. The five post-1992 universities, together with the OU, accounted for most first-degree provision, whereas FECs accounted for nearly all HNC/HND provision. The institutions currently comprising the HE sector had shed most of their HNC/HND provision over the previous decade.

We analysed the 1994 prospectuses and other recruitment material for all HEIs and FECs in Scotland. We identified 563 part-time HNC/D courses, of which all but 21 were in the FE sector, and 76 part-time first degree courses, of which all but four were in HEIs. The courses were fairly evenly spread across subject

Table 1: Distribution of part-time undergraduate students, 1993-94

	First degree	HND	HNC	Other HE	All
Pre-1992 universities	11%	0%	0%	0%	4%
Post-1992 universities	29%	34%	4%	23%	18%
Other HEIs	2%	0%	0%	2%	1%
Open University	56%	0%	0%	9%	21%
FECs	3%	66%	96%	66%	56%
Total	101%	100%	100%	100%	100%
n	15,583	1,316	16,980	12,438	46,317

Source: Scottish Office statistics, adjusted.

areas in the HE sector, but FE courses tended to be concentrated in business studies, engineering and technology. However, prospectuses provide incomplete information, and the growing flexibility and responsiveness of the system make it impossible to map provision definitively.

Institutions' policies for part-time HE

We interviewed senior policy-makers from all 23 HEIs in Scotland and a sample of 11 FECs. All the FECs aimed to expand part-time advanced provision. In the HE sector the post-1992 universities, already the largest providers of part-time (undergraduate) HE, were the most determined to expand provision and were likely to do so most quickly. The policies of the pre-1992 universities were more varied, although several planned to expand part-time provision. The current provision of non-university HEIs was low and few planned to increase it.

Most institutions had a policy to increase the flexibility of their provision. Many universities pursued a model of flexible integration, and aimed to make all provision accessible to full-time and part-time students in a way that did not exclude or disadvantage part-timers. Many colleges pursued a model of flexible differentiation, responding to the diversity of employer and student demand by providing more customised and dedicated part-time courses.

Four sets of factors influenced institutions' policies for part-time HE:

- the institutional mission, and its emphasis on objectives such as access, community links or serving the local labour market;
- other institutional factors, including location, the scale of existing part-time HE provision and the structure of courses, which influenced the costs and benefits of introducing or expanding part-time provision. Modularisation, credit-rating and semesterisation were perceived to reduce the costs of introducing part-time provision or of expanding it from a small base;

Many institutions plan to expand part-time provision but feel that their policies are driven by external pressures.

Does your institution plan to increase part-time provision? How deeply rooted is this policy?

- government policy and funding, such as the consolidation or capping of full-time provision, which encouraged institutions to give more priority to part-time provision; and
- demand, which most institutions expected would increase, although some of their reasons for this appeared vague.

Despite the devolution of policy-making powers to institutions, many of the policy-makers we interviewed felt that their policies were driven by external pressures, especially those associated with funding and markets.

Evidence from the case studies

The courses and programmes studied

The final component of our research was a series of case studies. These were conducted in four institutions, chosen to reflect the diversity of part-time HE in Scotland:

- a large FEC with a well-established tradition of advanced course provision: we studied an HNC course in Accounting, which students could attend in the day and/or evening, and a day-release HNC course in Graphic Design;
- a smaller college with less experience of advanced provision: we studied an evening HNC course in Social Care, and three interlinked Engineering HNCs. Two of the three were day-release, and the other was a mixed-mode afternoon plus evening course;
- a post-1992 university: we studied a large BSc Health Studies programme, taught mainly during the evening, and a Combined Studies degree programme which provided opportunities to 'infill' into units from the university's mainstream provision;
- a pre-1992 university: we studied two courses from a part-time degree programme, largely based on evening classes. All students covered at least three subjects, and our study focused on staff and students in Business Studies and English Studies.

Institutions are becoming more flexible, but this does not always directly favour part-time provision.

What are the implications of different types of flexibility for part-time provision?

We also conducted a survey of part-time students selected from the full range of HNC/D and first-degree courses or programmes in the four institutions, and from the OU.

None of the four institutions was a pure example of either flexible differentiation or flexible integration as described above. The two colleges most nearly matched the model of flexible differentiation, with part-time and full-time provision largely separate. However the colleges' provision contained increasing elements of flexible integration: for instance, part-time students could often select from full-time provision. The post-1992 university was the closest to the model of flexible integration. In the pre-1992 university, part-time provision had developed largely separately from full-time (daytime) provision, although part-time students had access to daytime courses and to courses taught on a summer programme. Except where student numbers were very large, there was

a trade-off between the breadth of options made available through integrated provision, and the responsiveness to part-time students' needs, circumstances and experience which was possible with differentiated provision.

Students' backgrounds and motivations

There is no typical part-time student. The students in the four institutions came from a wide range of social and demographic backgrounds. Nearly all were economically active and most were in full-time jobs. University students most commonly had technician-level jobs, and college students more often had clerical or craft occupations. Most part-time students had already gained qualifications since school, often by part-time study. Some used credit from previous qualifications or part-qualifications towards their current courses. Our study suggests that for many students part-time HE is not a "second chance" but a "further step".

Many staff and students perceive differences in culture, motivation and background between full-time and part-time students.

What differences do you perceive? How should institutions respond to them?

Many staff perceived a cultural difference between full-time and part-time students. Part-timers tended to be more highly motivated, more demanding but also more rewarding to teach. Some staff suggested that part-timers displayed a "customer culture" in their approach to their course.

Most students had decided to study for a combination of vocational and personal reasons, and these were closely intertwined. Many students studied in order to increase their personal fulfilment within their jobs, independently of possible career advancement. Most students reported that the vocational benefits from study derived as much from the development of "personal" qualities such as self-confidence as from the acquisition of job-specific skills. Most students expected some occupational advantage from their study, either with their current employer or through a change of job, but they rarely knew precisely how, or when, this would occur. Given this uncertainty, it is not surprising that for many students personal motives were at least as important as occupational ones in their decision to participate. Some students' vocational motives were defensive, to protect existing positions in the labour market, or as a response to unemployment. Several students said that their motivation had changed over time; some had become more aware of personal benefits from studying.

Employers

Even when supported by employers, students are the main customers of part-time HE.

Are part-time opportunities marketed to the appropriate audiences?

Employers' support for employees taking courses was highly variable. Around six in ten college students and four in ten university students (excluding the OU) received support from their employers with course fees. Some were allowed time off work. Employers who supported part-time study typically did so in order to enhance skills and to encourage loyalty among their employees. The fragmentation of demand makes it difficult to predict future trends, but employers are expected to become increasingly selective in their support for part-time study and to demand a larger contribution from students in terms of money and/or time.

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Employers and institutions often found it hard to sustain the kinds of relationships presupposed by the notion of 'responsiveness'.

What models of the relationship between employers and institutions should guide future policy and practice?

Students and not employers were the main customers of part-time HE: even when supported by employers, most students had taken the initiative to study. Employers were relatively passive in their dealings with institutions, and in communicating their demands or expectations. In many cases it was left to national industrial or professional bodies to articulate these demands. Institutions, especially colleges, were taking steps to enhance their links with employers, but we became aware of difficulties that both sides faced in developing a genuinely mutual, sustained and productive relationship. Current notions of institutional 'responsiveness' to employer demand presuppose a pattern of relationships between institutions and employers which both sides find difficult to sustain in most circumstances.

The part-time educational experience

Students were generally positive about their part-time status and the advantages of studying part-time. Most were at least satisfied with their course; some were fulsome in their enthusiasm for the course and for the change it had introduced to their lives. Most spoke of enhanced self-confidence or other personal gains. Even though some of the courses led to qualifications whose labour-market value was uncertain, most saw or expected some occupational benefits, often as a result of these more generic competences.

Part-time provision often has marginal status, although students are not necessarily offended by this.

How can the status of part-timers be strengthened, in respect of recruitment policies, access to facilities, and curriculum and teaching strategies?

Many part-time students felt marginal within their institutions. Those who were 'infilling' on to full-time courses could feel excluded socially and if lecturers assumed they had covered the same units as their fellow-students. Students on dedicated part-time courses could feel marginalised because the timing of their classes excluded them from full institutional life. Students were often content with this relatively marginal status, although many would have welcomed easier access to facilities which would confirm their status as full members of the institution. Some university staff felt that part-time students lost out as a result of their reduced access to the broader life of the department and the institution. The OU, with its experience of providing exclusively for part-timers, attracted favourable reports from students in the survey.

The content, standards and regulations of most part-time programmes were formally comparable with full-time provision, although admission requirements sometimes differed. In practice, rules were often applied more flexibly to part-time students – for example, deadlines for coursework might be relaxed for students with work pressures. Teaching staff suggested that courses delivered to part-time students might be reduced in content and more 'packaged' than the equivalent full-time courses, reflecting the reduced contact hours and/or opportunity for study outwith course hours. On the other hand, students benefited from their own and fellow-students' experience, especially in vocational areas, which they could in varying degrees integrate with their course learning. Some staff used more participative teaching methods to tap this experience, and to take advantage of the greater maturity of part-time students and the smaller student numbers on some part-time courses.

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Less than a fifth of part-time students felt able to say whether full-time or part-time provision was better quality – but nearly all of those who perceived a difference felt that full-time provision was better. Several felt that full-timers were better provided for in terms of library and other facilities, and student support. However most students, especially women, found their main sources of support in their social milieux rather than from institutions' own provision. Our data suggest that the main quality issue is not whether the standards, curriculum or teaching in part-time HE are better or worse than those in full-time HE. It is rather that the methods, content and context of learning may differ for part-time and full-time students, and this may have implications not only for quality assurance but also for flexibility, progression and credit transfer in a system where students increasingly move between modes.

Full-time and part-time study may be qualitatively different experiences, rather than 'better' or 'worse'.

Do you agree? What are the implications for quality assurance and for transfer between modes?

The impact of part-time study on students' lives varied between daytime and evening students and according to the other claims on their time. Some students entered their courses to fill a new vacuum in their lives – for example, if a partner was frequently absent on work, or if children had grown up and left home. Others struggled to fit their studying into an already crowded timetable of work, family and social commitments, and devised complex routines and strategies for managing their time. Work and family usually had priority if there was a conflict.

Advantages and disadvantages

Some of the advantages and disadvantages of part-time HE reported by our respondents are summarised below:

Students, institutions, staff and employers perceived different advantages and disadvantages of part-time HE.

What advantages and disadvantages do you perceive, for yourself and for the community?

How far are the potential advantages realised in practice?

	Advantages	Disadvantages
To the student	• Access - a chance to study without surrendering job and income • Career benefits • Personal gains - self-confidence, sense of achievement • Educational benefits - using work and other experience • Having a stable financial and temporal framework to study within • Social benefits - meeting other students	• Time required to study • Strains on family and social life • Fees • Marginality in institution • Narrowness: no time to read outside subject, miss social experience of student life
To the institution	• Achieving mission: eg access • Means to expand • Strengthening links with employers and community • Efficient use of resources • Broadening student composition	• Conflict with mission: eg research • High administrative costs • Development and overhead costs • Quality issues
To employers	• More skilled workforce • Rewarding loyalty	• Time off job • Fees

To individual staff	• Satisfaction from teaching mature and motivated students • Developing new teaching approaches • Contact with employers and occupational practice	• Unsocial hours • Increased workload • More demanding students

Discussion

Part-time provision has declined as a proportion of total HE at undergraduate level.

What role should part-time provision play in a future mass HE system?

Our research aimed to assess the current role of part-time provision at first degree and HNC/D level, and to inform debates about its future role.

We have identified several positive features of its current role. Part-time HE caters successfully for students with very diverse needs, backgrounds and circumstances. It is part of an increasingly diverse, but articulated, framework of opportunities for adult study. It provides opportunities both for personal development and for occupational advancement. It allows learning to complement work and other experience to an extent rarely possible in full-time study. Many institutions plan to increase flexibility and to expand part-time provision. It is valued by employers and students, whose commitments of time and money represent considerable "leverage" for the public resources that are invested.

But despite these positive features, the role of part-time HE in Scotland remains marginal, and may be becoming more so. The move towards a mass HE system has been led by the expansion of full-time participation; part-timers have declined as a proportion of total student numbers, and are still concentrated in particular sectors. Increased flexibility in HE does not necessarily involve an increase in part-time study. Institutions' plans to expand provision could easily be blown off course by uncertainties about funding or demand. Employer support for part-time study is becoming more qualified and often less dependable; links between institutions and employers are patchy.

Can part-time provision play a more central role in future? We believe that it can, and it should; but this will not happen automatically. Clear commitments are needed at all levels. If more individuals are to be encouraged to invest in part-time study, they need the incentive of more predictable rewards from the labour market and a clear structure of progression opportunities. To maximise the value of the joint investment in part-time study, employers should recognise the value of broader and longer-term forms of learning, including learning which promotes personal development. Above all, if part-time HE is to play its full role in developing the learning society of the future, this will require continued action from government, to facilitate demand for part-time provision by changing the system of student fees and support, and to promote supply by continuing to provide appropriate incentives and encouragement to institutions; and from institutions, to respond to these initiatives by following through their declared intentions to expand part-time provision and by maintaining a commitment to part-time students as full members of their community.

Final report

Further details of the study are available in the full report *Part-time Higher Education in Scotland*, available from the Centre for Educational Sociology, ISES, 7 Buccleuch Place, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh EH8 9LW, price £10.
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